

[On German Clockmakers]

1 W15050

2 Typed 1 [?] [Thomaston?] Typed Dec. 11

Friday Nov. 4, '38 I found Art [?] Botsford leaving for a trip out of town. He said he wouldn't be back until late tonight, and I made an appointment for next week I called [on?] several old [?] [timex?] employees of the company, among them John Davis, who came to this country from England as a youngster, who early in life learned the knifemaking trade from his father, and who entered the service of Seth Thomas Clock Company as a young man and remained with them for 42 years.

Mr. Davis had an interesting sidelight on the German clockmakers — the first sour note in the paeon of praise for these old craftsmen.

"They were good," said he; "but they were tinkers. They did everything the hard way, and sometimes they wouldn't take advantage of innovations, though they would have saved them time and money. If they had to have a tool, for instance, they'd likely as not make it out of wood, and fuss around for hours with it, when they could have ordered the same thing from the toolroom, and had an expert job done in a fraction of the same time.

"You'd be surprised how cheap they worked, too. It's always been my opinion that they hired so many of them [?] because they got 'em for next to nothing. I remember an old fellow named Hoffman, who used to make [vergos?] — that was a job that called for skill and [?] should have been fairly well paid.

"About the time war broke out in Europe, Hoffman came to the superintendent, who was a pretty good friend of mine and asked [?] for a raise. The superintendent gave him a raise of 25 cents a day, which was a pretty good increase. But he told me — and I was certainly [??] surprised — that Hoffman had only been getting two dollars a day.

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“They learned [?] their trades mostly in homes, as some of them may have told you. And speaking of homework for the factories—there used to be plenty of that done around here in the old days.

“When I was a kid a bunch of us were out walking in the woods and 2 we came upon an [?] old, deserted, tumbled down house. Boy like, we had to investigate. In one of the rooms we found [?] small wooden boxes, piled on one another, and when we had pried some of them open we [?] found them filled with wooden wheels of various sizes for clock movements. Apparently that whole family had been engaged in turning out those wheels—I think they made them from laurel, which is nearly as hard as boxwood.

“I learned knife-making at home, from my old man [?] but I didn't work at it. I got a job in the [?] metal case division in the Clock shop, and I worked there most of my life, except when I [?] went to Trenton for a while to work.

“I used to be foreman of the dial room and I remember that for many [?] years I had over my desk a clock with a hand-painted dial. I don't know when it was made, but evidently they did that sort of thing at one time. It wasn't artistic, by any means, but it was ornate — a painstaking [king?] piece of work. There were flowered decorations all around the dial and even the numerals had been painted on. The dial was wood, and as thick as the palm of your hand.

“They had a [?] sun-dial once, just outside the Marine shop, that used to be [?] consulted for absolutely correct time. Afterward, they received the time by telegram every day from the Greenwich observatory, and then they made [?] one of those astronomical clocks and used that as a master clock. It was jeweled at every possible place and must have cost a small fortune.

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“And don't let anyone tell you that [?] weather doesn't affect clocks. When I worked for a while in [?] the watch division I can remember them [?] putting watches in a refrigerator and adjusting them afterwards to allow for extreme cold [?] ”

3

E.R. Kaiser, employed by the company for more than 40 years. Formerly superintendent, now first selectman of the town. German parentage. Residence, [?] High street.

“If you're going to write anything about Aaron Thomas, for God's sake give him credit for being a civic-minded, charitable man. Why that very clock” (pointing to a massive, old fashioned mahogany wall clock with pendulum movement that hangs upon the wall in his office) “that very clock was given to the town by Aaron Thomas when he became first selectman. And that isn't all he did by a long shot.

“During the panic of 1887 he gave all his farm produce—and it was plenty—to the [needy?]. He had acres and acres of land, with half dozen hands working steady under an overseer. He had prize cattle and horses.

“He was always doing things for the town and for the church—he belonged to the Congregational church—but half of them were never heard of and he got no credit—not that he ever cared. He donated land for the two Swedish churches here I believe, though I'm not certain.

“Sure [?] weather affects clocks—that's pretty generally known. The balance movements will vary more than the pendulums though. We made the finest railroad movement in the country over at the old Marine shop, and it was [?] adjusted to heat and cold.”

A picture of Aaron Thomas as a sort of benevolent despot, irascible, high [?] tempered, with almost feudal power over his employees, and at [?] same time democratic and unaffected to an extraordinary degree, takes [?] form from conversations with those who [?] knew him. The last of the Thomases to actively conduct the busine as in his native

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community, his name is mentioned by these, his old employees, so often not only because he was their contemporary, but because he was indubitably a truly remarkable character. Here's more about [?] him, gleaned from James Wilson, [?] Scotch, who worked nearly 45 years for the company. He lives on Judson street.

4

People were up against it because there wasn't much in the way of organized relief in those days. But them that lived in the company houses didn't have to pay their rent. That was Aaron Thomas's doings. They owned a good number of houses then. They owned the Cotton row, and the Yellow row over on Railroad and Chapel streets, and the row on Clay street and a lot more.

“Walter Thomas was superintendent of the case shop, I think, when I came to work here, and Edison Thomas was superintendent of the tower clock department. Edison also ran the old brick yard up [?] off crow hill asa sideline, but I don't [?] think it was very [?] profitable.

“In those days they had about 1, 000 to 12, 00 hands throughout the three plants, and if I remember rightly they had about eight clerks—that was their whole office force. They tell [?] me now they have [?] sixty-eight office workers. And I misdoubt they can count 300 hands.

“Doc Bradstreet used to be vice president [?] when I went to work in 1886. He took care of most of the office work, they said, and you wouldn't [?] see him walk through the plant more than twice a year. He'd always speak nicely to everybody though. Old Aaron Thomas, I used to see him walking by my house every Sunday with old Mr Miner, who used to be handy man over in the Movement shop. They'd go out in the woods for a stroll, every Sunday morning. Would [?] you see any of them doing that today? [?] You would not.

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“Woodruff was a different [?] type. I mean [??] William T. Woodruff the president after Aaron. He came through the stock room where I was working one day, and he was looking for trouble. But I had everything arranged in good [?] order. He couldn't find anything to complain about, so after he'd looked around for about five minutes, [?] he said: “Who takes care of this place?” I said: “I do.” “I thought so, says he, very [??] sarcastic, and walks away.”

“But for all hewas so high mighty I remember when his father, old Doc Woodruff, kept cows and pigs and chickens in the barn in back of that fine big house of theirs.”